

Home is where the heart is

Pharmacist Kristen McCloy, PharmD, is a critical member of the home infusion therapy care team

KRISTEN MCCLOY, PharmD, is the Pharmacy Supervisor at MediLink Homecare Inc., a licensed pharmacy that specializes in home infusion therapy. Home infusion provides patients with an alternative to receiving I.V. therapy in the hospital, allowing them to receive treatment in the comfort of their own homes. It takes a special care team to offer this service, where the pharmacist serves as an integral connection between the patient, nurse and prescriber. “Pharmacists play such a critical role because at its heart, MediLink is a pharmacy,” said McCloy. “You can’t have a pharmacy without pharmacists!”

Until relatively recently, patients receiving infusion therapy had to remain in the hospital for the duration of their treatment. Increased attention on cost savings, as well as technological breakthroughs in the clinical administration of drugs has led to the ability to safely and effectively administer infusion therapy in a variety of settings, such as the home, a physician’s office, or an infusion suite.

Established in 1994 and based in Hammonton, NJ, MediLink Homecare works with area physicians and hospital systems to administer medication using I.V., subcutaneous, and epidural



routes. “We are a pharmacy, which is something that not everyone really is aware of,” explained McCloy. “We provide intravenous and injectable products, as well as some enteral products. We do not stock or provide oral medications. We have a clean room and ante room on site for preparation of products.”

How it works

Patients with diagnoses such as infections, multiple sclerosis, cancer, pain, or immune disorders are candidates for home infusion therapy. The process usually begins when a patient is preparing to leave

the hospital. “At MediLink,” said McCloy, “we have an intake department that coordinates with hospital discharge planners to make arrangements to get the medication orders and set up an appointment with a nurse to visit the patient for initial teaching visit.” Nurses also typically visit each patient once a week for labs (if ordered) and to perform dressing changes on the patient’s access device. “Our patient care coordinators work very closely with our pharmacists, nurses, and prescribers to keep everyone informed on a given patient’s progress. They call each patient to schedule deliveries and to check in and see if the patient has any concerns or problems to report,” she said.

Once a pharmacist processes an order, the product is compounded by a technician in MediLink’s clean room. “The pharmacists oversee and check everything before it goes out to the patient. In addition to providing the medication, we provide what-

ever supplies are necessary to complete the infusion, such as I.V. administration tubing, I.V. dressing changes, and flushes for the catheters," McCloy told *Today*.

MediLink pharmacists also provide medication therapy management (MTM) services by counseling patients about their medications, reviewing any other medications that the patient may be taking, checking for interactions, and making recommendations or interventions as needed. "Our pharmacists review and monitor a patient's progress throughout the ordered therapy as well," said McCloy. "We review lab results, monitor for

ment, home infusion therapy offers many benefits. "Patients find the convenience and comfort of being at home very appealing. They can often return to their normal routines and even, in some cases, return to work or school while receiving infusion therapy from portable pumps," said McCloy. Patients don't have the risk of hospital-acquired infections and are not confined to rehabilitation facilities. "Most are able to maintain an active lifestyle while getting care for their condition. They have minimal interruptions to their daily activities. It is also a very cost-effective way to receive treatment

antibiotics or a patient who has Crohn's disease and needs regular infusions of Remicade to control the condition.

While many home infusion patients are on antibiotics, MediLink also provides chemotherapy drugs, immune globulin for patients with chronic immune deficiencies, nutritional therapies for patients who have chronic diseases that do not allow their bodies to absorb the necessary nutrients, and I.V. steroids such as Solu-Medrol for patients with multiple sclerosis or similar conditions. Diseases can be complex or rare. "We have treated patients with rare genetic diseases like



adverse events, alert the prescriber of any problems, and make recommendations for changes in therapy if, for instance, lab results are not meeting goals."

Along with staff nurses and pharmacists, MediLink employs its own drivers to make deliveries. "We also work with nursing agencies in the New Jersey area to provide care to the patients we service. The nurses and drivers are the ones who truly go into the field and visit our patients' homes," McCloy said. At MediLink, pharmacists and nurses are available 24/7 in the event of emergencies or problems.

Benefits of home infusion therapy

For patients who require long-term treat-

ment because we're able to eliminate the high costs of a hospital stay," she explained.

In addition to hospital systems, MediLink also works with physician offices to help patients who are in need of therapy, but not hospitalization. "For example," said McCloy, "we are often able to prevent a patient's hospitalization for a complicated wound or infection by starting them as an outpatient on I.V. antibiotic therapy. We coordinate a patient's needs with the physician office in mostly the same way as we do a hospital discharge."

Home infusion patients

Patients who are referred to MediLink from physician offices could include someone who has cellulitis, has failed oral antibiotics, and now requires a course of I.V.

Gaucher disease or bleeding disorders like von Willebrand, and that involves researching the condition to familiarize yourself with it," noted McCloy.

MediLink also works with patients who are seen daily in physician office-based infusion suites. MediLink provides medication and nursing services in its infusion suites to patients who are unable to be seen in the home. "The physician office-based infusion suites provide this opportunity for the patient to receive treatment without being confined to a hospital or rehabilitation facility—usually their only other option," McCloy said.

Up for the challenge

A lifelong New Jersey resident, McCloy graduated from the Ernest Mario School

of Pharmacy at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, in 2004. After graduation, she spent a few months working for Walmart and traveled throughout southern New Jersey working at the pharmacies in different stores. A few months after graduation, she had the opportunity to open up a new store as Pharmacy Manager. She spent more than a year as Pharmacy Manager before deciding it was time for something new. "Although I enjoyed what I was doing, I wanted something that was more clinically challenging. I wasn't completely sure about what I wanted for a career, but I knew that I needed

ing nurses and prescribers. Even better, there seemed to be an excellent rapport between the physician offices and the pharmacists who worked together routinely. I was also intrigued by the ante/clean room and the compounding aspect of it," she said.

In 2006, McCloy accepted a clinical pharmacist position at MediLink and was promoted to pharmacy supervisor in 2009. It was quite a change of pace and mentality coming from a large discount chain to an independent pharmacy model, McCloy told Today. "I have administrative duties that are pretty consistent with any

said.

McCloy mentioned that communicating via telephone can present its own challenges. "It can be difficult to assess adherence and understanding with instructions. You don't get those visual clues or body language that someone may not really understand the instructions you are providing," she said. "To make up for that, I try to use alternative techniques to assess their understanding. I will often ask them to repeat back to me the instructions that I have given them. Using open-ended questions is also a big help."

Thanks to MediLink and pharmacists



something that was more challenging and allowed me to use more of the skills that I had learned in pharmacy school," explained McCloy. She came across an ad in a newspaper for a pharmacist position at MediLink. "I figured it was worth a try. Home infusion was something that I never had heard of, but I was open to the idea of something new," she said.

After interviewing for the position, McCloy found herself drawn to the unique setting and the opportunities it presented. "It was something that really allowed you to have an impact in patients' lives and use many different clinical skills every day. I saw that there was a lot of interaction with multiple disciplines includ-

supervisory or managerial role, and I also am very involved in patient care," she said. "I carry a patient case load that includes home patients as well as two physician office-based infusion suites."

Working closely with patients

One of the most rewarding aspects for McCloy is interacting with patients. "I am able to get to know them and answer any questions they may have. As we are a closed door pharmacy—patients do not walk in and drop off prescriptions as they would in a traditional retail or community setting—my primary method of contact with my patients is via the telephone," she

such as McCloy, patients can receive infusion therapy in the comfort of their own home, which can save money, promote quicker recovery, and improve the quality of life for patients and their family or caregiver. For pharmacists, home infusion therapy can offer an interesting and rewarding career. "I have had the opportunity for personal and professional growth since starting at MediLink," said McCloy. "It's refreshing. I continue to enjoy the unique setting and the interdisciplinary cooperation that goes into each patient's care."

**—Amy K Erickson
Contributing writer**